

Notes on the Underground

By VICTOR S. NAVASKY

IF all of the critics who reviewed my first book ("The Revelations of Doctor Moderato") like they said they did, why did it only sell 4,500 copies?" asks Alan Harrington, the perplexed author of both novels. The answer is easy. "Revelations," which was published in 1965 and which some critics have seen as the beginning of black humor, was an underground book. And anybody who knows anything about underground books knows that by definition, they are read by, circulated and celebrated among, a select group of relatively sophisticated literati whose tastes are at least a book ahead of the marketplace. The general public does not, as a rule, ride the underground railroad.

This does not mean that the general public does not read underground books. They often do. It's just that the public at large follows a different timetable. Henry Roth's Depression novel, "Call It Sleep," for instance, was an underground book for 30 years, when an enterprising paperback publisher (Peter Mayer of Avon Books) and a front-page review in this section managed to bring it to the public's attention.

William Golding's "Lord of the Flies" and Terry Southern's "The Magic Christian" (both tinged with mysticism, as so many of the underground genre seem to be) enjoyed happy reputations as underground best sellers before each found its own route to public attention. And recently, Grove Press, trying to speed up the conversion process, has taken

Mr. Navasky is editor of *Monocle*, which surfaces periodically.

a series of ads inviting the reading public to "Join the Underground! (Your best friend may be a member.)" Grove's underground consists and has consisted of such books as "The Olympia Press Reader" edited by Maurice Girodias, "Tropic of Cancer" by Henry Miller, "Naked Lunch" by William Burroughs, "City of Night" by John Rechy and "The Marquis de Sade."

Traditionally, underground books like underground tests, come to the attention of the reading public only (a) when somebody gets around to banning them, or (b) when the explosion is so great that the rumbles can't be contained beneath the surface. Many of Grove's books are examples of the former. And Ralph Nader's devastating critique of auto industry safety practices, "Unsafe at Any Speed" (Grossman Publishers), is a good example of the latter.

Even prior to publication, Nader's book had won an underground following based on a chapter which had appeared in *The Nation*, Nader's annual recruitment of attaché-case-carrying doctors and lawyers to picket the auto show at New York City's Coliseum, a rumor that one or more national magazines had decided against reviewing the book for fear of jeopardizing multi-million-dollar advertising contracts, and a wide acquaintanceship in journalistic and political circles among people who had come to respect his single-minded integrity. Yet it took a private eye, a series of nationally televised U.S. Senate hearings and an apology from the President of General Motors to get "Unsafe at Any Speed" onto the best-seller lists.

Yet any serious student of the underground railroad knows that a

Congressional investigation is the exception rather than the rule. If we are to understand why some books ride the local and others the express, why some books eventually see daylight while others take a perpetual shuttle from subculture to subculture, why some get a free ride and others end up trampled in the rush of the avant-garde to catch the latest trend, then a comprehensive survey is needed. Such a survey will take into account the book, the author, the subject, the timing and the situation or, as they say in "the underground, the scene."

THE list of ideal-types which follows does not pretend to be that survey. It is, however, intended to serve as a map to assist future explorers in this relatively uncharted terrain. There are, fundamentally, eight different kinds of underground books:

1. *The Pure Underground Book.* The average underground book aspires to daylight, to visibility, to elevation. As often as not its editor is the one who started all the talk in the first place, as Simon & Schuster editor Bob Gottlieb and others did about "Catch-22" before it caught. It is the distinction of the Pure Underground Book that it will never see daylight, being destined to have a quiet subsurface sale for the duration of its unnatural life. Such a book seems to be "The Recognitions" by William Gaddis, originally published in 1955 by Harcourt, Brace & World.

The principal means of survival of the Pure Underground Book is the pure devotion of its principal supporters. Robert Ockene, an editor at Bobbs-Merrill which has nothing to do with "The Recognitions," is a typical Gaddis-enthusiast. He reports that he has given away 25 copies of "The Recognitions," three in the last year, that his own copy is on loan to someone who had lent him a copy of another underground book ("V." by Thomas Pynchon), and that he had never heard of Gaddis before the book came out. "The marvelous thing," Mr. Ockene says, "is that I discovered it myself. We all did. This isn't a book which was talked up by the agent, editor or publisher." Not all enthusiasts, however, are content for such books to remain underground, which brings up . . .

2. *The In-Transit Underground Book.* The In-Transit Underground Book is only a temporary resident, traveling underground on its way to a more visible destination. Often this is a matter of timing. When a book appears before its time, it is only a matter of time before a review (as in the case of Irving Howe's front-page review of "Call It Sleep" 30-odd years after the fact) or an

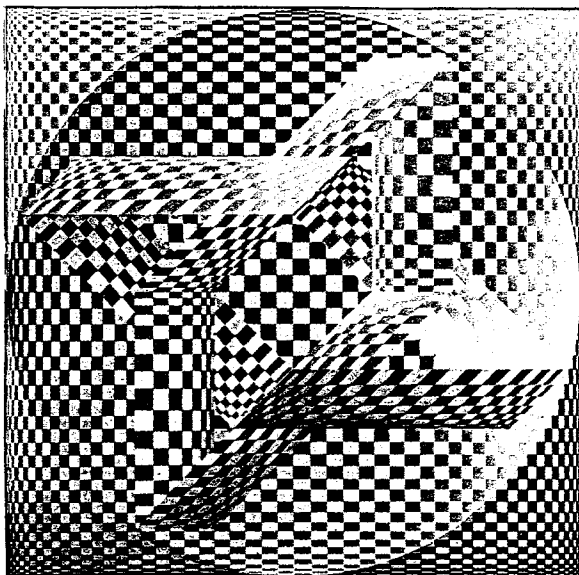
ex-post-facto event (like the revelation that an author of the controversial movie, "Dr. Strangelove" and the co-author of "Candy" was also the author of "The Magic Christian") comes along and thrusts the book into prominence.

Of course there is always the danger that a book will come out after its time or, to complicate matters further, that it will be behind its time in some respects and ahead in others. For instance, "The Ecstasy of Owen Muir" by Ring Lardner Jr., which came out in the early fifties, reflected the politics of the thirties but anticipated the literary styles of the sixties. In any event, by some principle of consanguinity it is often the case that a book which makes the transition from the underground is replaced by an earlier work of the same author. Thus, now that all of the media are busy interpreting the meaning of Marshall McLuhan's erstwhile underground book, "Understanding Media," we are assured that his first book, "The Mechanical Bride" (out of print), is the real underground McLuhan book.

3. *The Author's Underground Book.* This book is, of course, an underground book only in the author's imagination. In everybody else's eyes it is a flop. This might seem like a trivial category until one realizes that the list of imagined underground books is almost as long as the list of books in print. In fact one theory is that it is the list of books in print, minus 10 (the 10 books on the best-seller list at the time).

4. *The Underwater Book.* The underwater book is a special kind of underground book not recognized as such at first because when it comes out it is greeted with a big splash and inundated in such praise and fame that everyone assumes it is just another typical best seller. Eventually, however, the truth comes out and despite the waves of favorable publicity and the fact that everybody else is reading it, the book is discovered by the underground. That, at any rate, is the history of Beatie John Lennon's collection of puns, "In His Own Write."

5. *The Unpublished Underground Book.* Perhaps the most prestigious underground book is the one which wins its reputation in manuscript form. Many people had read and talked about Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" long before publication; the same reportedly went for such an ambitious undertaking as Marguerite Young's "Miss MacIntosh, My Darling" (a 1,198 page book, 17 years in the writing); the original Tom Wolfe used to carry around his manuscripts to cocktail parties; and Mark Lane's yet-to-be-published critique of the Warren Commission's report has been making the rounds for over a year in continuously revised drafts. The difficulty with this particular form of underground circulation is that a manuscript's reputation often abruptly ends with publication. I prefer to believe that this is because (Continued on Page 58)



Painting by Benjamin Frazer. Collection the Museum of Modern Art, Larry Auerbach Foundation Fund.